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The Bible: History or Myth?

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When you hear the word “myth” associated with the Bible, what is the first thought that comes to your mind?

Many use the term myth in a pejorative sense to mean that the stories described are not factually true. Others define myth as non-historical tales that contain a moral message. Both of these definitions miss the richness of the term. Mythology is a form of literature that expresses fundamental truths in a way that ordinary discourse is inadequate to describe. The stories that make up the myths are often anchored in some historical reality, but this need not be so. Mythology adds a richness of detail and a concreteness to metaphorical language. Reading Biblical stories as mythology gives me the freedom to understand their underlying meaning in a way I never did when I was taught as a child that these stories were factually true.

Why do most modern scholars reject a reading of the Bible as history much less as literal fact?

1. In an age of science and technology, too much of the Bible is simply unbelievable to today’s mind and turns people away from the underlying messages. From a scientific standpoint, many of the “facts” in the Bible are simply wrong. One of many examples: according to Genesis, the universe is just over 6000 years old. According to physics, the Big Bang occurred 13.7 billion years ago.

2. Many of the stories are also scientifically impossible, like the tale of Joshua stopping the sun moving across the sky. This story assumes (as was the thinking then) that the earth was flat and was at the center of the universe. We simply know this to be false. Second, for the sun to stop would mean that the earth would have to cease rotating on its axis — an event which would destroy the planet.

3. For many of the miracle stories, natural explanations exist. The authors of these stories lived in an age when people believed that solar eclipses were divine omens, disease was divine punishment, and mental illness was caused by demon possession. In the case of Jesus, healing was an important part of his ministry. However, today we can find faith healers in Haiti who practice voodoo and in tribal Africa who practice witchcraft. Many of these modern-day faith healers have patients who are actually

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healed by these practices. Doctors call this the placebo effect, an effect so powerful that drugs must undergo double blind experiments.

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4. Some of the mythological stories in the Bible are not original, but were borrowed from other traditions. The Epic of Gilgamesh — a Sumerian poem detailing the creation of the universe that predates the writings of Genesis by many centuries — contains a flood story whose plot points are almost identical to the story of Noah.

5. The other world religions also contain rich histories of mythology and fantastical sounding (to us) stories. On what basis can we Christians claim that our miracle stories are legitimate, yet theirs are flights of fancy? The mythology surrounding the Buddha, who lived 500 years before Jesus, includes tales of how he healed the sick, walked on water, and flew through the air. His birth was foretold by a spirit (a white elephant rather than the angel Gabriel) who then entered his mother's womb! At his birth, wise men predicted that he would become a great religious leader. Twentieth-century scholars Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell wrote that certain archetypal religious myths are found across cultures, histories, and religions. Examples include the Cosmic Tree, the Virgin BIrth, and The Resurrection.

6. The Bible itself is full of inconsistencies. How can it be an accurate historical record, when the various books contradict each other? Here is UNC Religion Professor Bart Ehrman:

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> *"Just take the death of Jesus. What day did Jesus die on and what time of day? Did he die on the day before the Passover meal was eaten, as John explicitly says, or did he die after it was eaten, as Mark explicitly says? Did he die at noon, as in John, or at 9 a.m., as in Mark? Did Jesus carry his cross the entire way himself or did Simon of Cyrene carry his cross? It depends which Gospel you read. Did both robbers mock Jesus on the cross or did only one of them mock him and the other come to his defense? It depends which Gospel you read. Did the curtain in the temple rip in half before Jesus died or after he died? It depends which Gospel you read ... Or take the accounts of the resurrection. Who went to the tomb on the third day? Was it Mary alone or was it Mary with other women? If it was Mary with other women, how many other women were there, which ones were they, and what were their names? Was the stone rolled away before they got there or not? What did they see in the tomb? Did they see a man, did they see two men, or did they see an angel? It depends which account you read."*

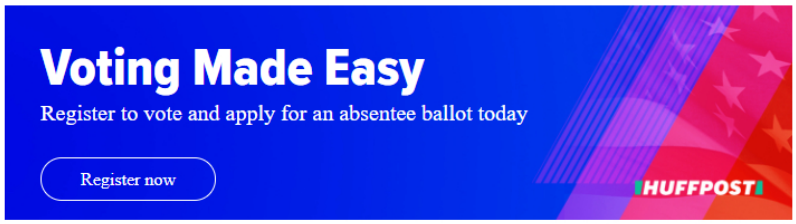
7. Reading the Bible as a literal historical account of events from the past limits the power of these stories. Rather than expressing universal truths, a literal interpretation limits the actions of God to certain events in history. God's actions in the world become finite, confined to certain historical events: like the chess master making individual moves on a chessboard frozen in time two thousand years ago. Reading these same stories mythologically, however, can bring forth their universal qualities.

8. A literal reading of the Bible alienates much of our society. The stories were written in a different age with different views on social justice — an age in which slavery was legitimate, an age when discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation was the norm. Too often because of this history, the Bible is used to justify intolerance today.

Reading the Bible as mythology is not a new concept. Two of the early Church Fathers, Origen (185-254 AD) and Augustine (354-430 AD), both interpreted Genesis metaphorically, rejecting literal interpretations. Early in the 20th century, German theologian Rudolf Bultmann called for a "demythologizing" of the New Testament for

many of the reasons given above. Rather, the movement in many fundamentalist circles today to read the Bible as inerrant (an extreme form of literalism, in which every word of Bible is viewed as true) is a late development from the 19th century as a response to the chipping away at the historicity of the stories since the Enlightenment.

I fear that an insistence on a literal or historical reading of the Bible will ultimately lead to the irrelevance of Christianity in our society. By throwing off the shackles of having to believe in the historicity of the Bible, we are free to interpret the stories as a testament to the religious experiences of people from a different age — a testament that communicates a meaning about their experiences of Ultimate Reality, of God. I understand that their experiences of the divine ground in their lives were interpreted through the lens of a pre-modern view of the world, and my own religious experiences will take on a different form today.



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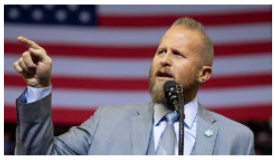

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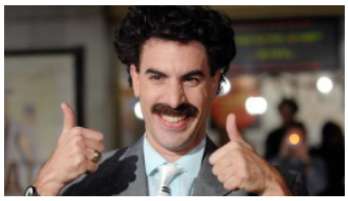

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